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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH OPPOSITION USING INDIAN DAM TO ATTACK
GOVERNMENT

REF: DHAKA 646

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) India's construction of a dam on a major river that flows into Bangladesh has triggered protests from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which claims the project threatens the region's environment and livelihoods. Party leaders clearly believe they can get political mileage out of the Tipaimukh Dam, particularly because most Bangladeshis view the governing Awami League as friendly towards India. Squabbling over the dam could also affect relations with India, just as the two neighbors are improving cooperation in counterterrorism and other areas vital to regional stability.

Strategic Area

2. (SBU) India plans to build the Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak River in India's northeast state of Manipur, about 100 km from the Bangladesh border. The river flows into northeastern Bangladesh near the major city of Sylhet and feeds into many tributaries vital to farmers in the region. The magnitude of the dam concerns environmentalists, who believe an earthquake could damage the dam causing catastrophic flooding. Bangladeshi critics of the dam claim it will cut off vital water supplies here.

Under Pressure

3. (SBU) Following street demonstrations in recent weeks by his party, BNP General Secretary Khandaker Delwar Hossain criticized the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) for failing to protect national interests with regard to Tipaimukh Dam. He threatened to file a case with the United Nations claiming violations of international waters law, specifically the 1997 Convention on the Law of Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses. On June 21, the BNP demanded the immediate removal of Indian High Commissioner Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty for allegedly disparaging Bangladeshi experts who criticized the dam. According to the BNP, Bangladesh should not stand silent while India builds a dam that could allegedly do irreparable harm to the environment and farmers' livelihoods.

GOB Response

4. (SBU) On June 16, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources formed a nine-member team of lawmakers and experts to visit the Tipaimukh Dam area to assess the dam's likely impact on Bangladesh. Finance Minister AMA Muhith said the team would focus on three issues:

--the dam's impact on biodiversity,
--potential increases/decreases to Barak River water flows after the
construction of the dam; and
--whether the dam would increase the likelihood of seismic activity.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in Parliament on June 29 that concerns about the dam would be resolved through bilateral talks with India. She expressed confidence her Government could successfully negotiate Bangladesh's interests and as proof of this pointed to the 1997 Ganges River Treaty signed during her previous government.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) The BNP sees in this issue an opportunity to damage the Awami League, which swept Parliamentary elections in December and may be vulnerable because of the widely held perception that it is pro-India. When asked whether the United States would get involved, the Ambassador said at a gathering of media and academics June 25 that Bangladesh should hold talks with India to settle this dispute.

¶6. (SBU) Speculation over the effects of the Tipaimukh Dam continues. Some in Bangladesh point to the nation's experience with the Farakka Barrage, a dam-like structure built by India on the Ganges River in West Bengal in 1975, which diverted water to the Hooghly River flowing through Kolkata and destroyed a key source of water for western Bangladesh. These experts worry the Tipaimukh Dam project will include embankments to divert water into India and away from Bangladesh. We continue to urge Bangladesh's political parties

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to work together to address this issue through talks with India.

Moriarty